Cat Detective

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CHAPTER 1

What Constitutes Problem Behaviour?

BEFORE WE EVEN START TO ADDRESS PROBLEM BEHAVIOUR IT is important to understand what we are up against. The dictionary definition of problem is 'anything that is difficult to deal with, solve or overcome'. Just remember that; we could be dealing with anything!

Normal behaviour performed in an inappropriate situation

Many of the problems that I am asked to address relate to normal feline behaviour. It is unreasonable to expect an animal INTRODUCTION not to behave naturally. Scratching, urine marking, climbing and even fighting, for example, all represent natural behaviour for the species. However, when a cat destroys an antique chaise longue by scratching or sprays urine into an electrical socket it is safe to say that this conflicts with normal domestic life in the average family home.

Inter-cat aggression is inappropriate if two cats start World War III in your front room but it certainly isn't abnormal or unnatural (read Chapter 7). Merely understanding this fact may make it easier to resolve the problem without apportioning blame to the aggressor. It is hard not to hate bullies since they would make such unpleasant human beings. However, they make extraordinarily effective cats when fighting to survive.

Predatory play is normal. Chasing a ping-pong ball or a feather on the end of a string is a pleasant activity that hones and refines hunting skills. When the target is the owner's hands and feet the behaviour is certainly inappropriate but it doesn't make the cat psychotic.

It is really important to identify those problems that arise from normal behaviour. In order to get a resolution it has to be remembered that the cat still needs to perform the behaviour, just somewhere more appropriate. Trying to stop scratching anywhere in the house, for example, is doomed to failure.

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Examples of normal behaviour that may become undesirable are

• indoor urination

• indoor defecation

• urine spraying (marking territory with urine)

• middening (marking territory with faeces)

• inter-cat aggression within the household

• inter-cat aggression in the territory outside (either victim or perpetrator)

• some aggression to humans (for example, play 'aggression')

• scratching on furniture or carpets

Incompatibility of owner/cat personality

If some owners stopped to think about the problems they are experiencing it could be that their relationship with their pet falls into this category. Has your cat really turned out to be the right one for you or vice versa? Purchasing or acquiring a cat will always have an element of gamble associated with it. The actual decision-making can be quite unscientific; here are just a few examples:

• I've always wanted a silver tabby.

• I felt sorry for him.

• Nobody else would want a cat with a history of aggression.

• I was looking for a cat just like the one I had when I was a child.

• It was the only kitten they had left.

What a person really should be looking for is a cat with the right personality, background and age to suit the sort of environment and lifestyle that he or she can provide. All sorts of problems can occur if the need to match up compatible personalities is not taken into consideration. Here are some examples of relationships that probably won't work.

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Unsocial cat/over-attached owner

This is often an acquisition based on colour, breed or any of the other coin-tossing methods of decision-making. The cat turns out to be a real loner and the new owner spends his or her entire time chasing it round the house to hold, stroke, squeeze and generally love it to pieces. This constant focus becomes extremely distressing for the cat and it develops all sorts of stress-related problems and weird and wonderful coping strategies to deal with it. The owner calls in a behaviourist to make the cat friendlier or stop it pulling all its fur out when what is really needed is a different cat (or a different owner).

Over-attached cat/over-attached owner

This may sound great on paper but it can be the ultimate dysfunctional relationship (see Chapter 10). Extremely compliant and caring owners focus totally on their cats. If they are matched with cats prone to insecurity then a strong dependency could soon develop. This is great until the owner in question actually wants a life outside the cat/human relationship. Poor pussy left all alone will potentially become highly distressed when separated and behave accordingly. Alternatively the cat may be a manipulative master of control and get the owner jumping through hoops just because it can.

Shy cat/noisy household

Cats from noisy and busy backgrounds are fine in noisy and busy houses. However, a shy and timid soul thrust into the average family home with 2.4 teenagers and a dog would probably dissolve in a heap or implode.

Over-attached cat/under-attached owner

I have experienced at least one case of this although, in my experience, it is relatively rare. An under-attached owner is possibly a good match for a potentially over-attached cat providing the cat has another focus in its life, such as going outside or activity indoors. However, the pairing is never perfect because, at the end of the day, you have a dissatisfied owner.

Unrealistic owner expectation

This is a very different problem from incompatibility because there probably isn't a cat in the land that would fulfil such an owner's expectations. There are a number of conditions that some people place on cat ownership and

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they usually have no bearing on a cat's natural needs, behaviour or desires whatsoever. For example:

• It is unrealistic to keep a cat exclusively indoors in a small bedsit, no matter how much a person needs company. There is nothing in it for the cat.

• It is unrealistic to expect a cat to sit quietly on a sofa twenty-four hours a day for the sole purpose of being there when the owner gets home. Some cats will do this but, not surprisingly, easily develop physical or emotional problems as a result.

• It is unrealistic to expect a cat not to hunt, fight or climb over the furniture. It's what they do.

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